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ABSTRACT

Over the last 2 years, 3 Australian universities have been cooperating on a Commonwealth Government funded project on Distance Teaching and Evaluation Skills to identify and disseminate good practice in the professional development of distance educators. A specific and supportive professional development intervention to foster the evaluation of subjects taught by distance education was studied. Experienced distance educators at the University of South Australia were asked to comment on components of an evaluation questionnaire that sought student responses to a teaching package with which they were working. From this, a revised general questionnaire and four shorter template versions were developed to deal with subject content, the study package and library services, the teaching process, and assessment. "Constructing an Evaluation Questionnaire" was also prepared. At two other universities, Deakin and Monash, professional development activities centered on workshops for distance educators to identify concerns and to consider the approach undertaken at the University of South Australia. Workshop participants concluded that "Constructing an Evaluation Questionnaire" and its supporting documents represents an approach suitable for inclusion in the general professional development resources for the Distance Teaching and Evaluation Skills project. (SLD)

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An approach to the evaluation of subjects taught in the distance mode

A paper prepared for the 16th World Conference of the International Council for Distance Education

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Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University

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An approach to the evaluation of subjects taught in the distance mode

In Australia, the Government has for some time been concerned about the quality of distance education provision at higher education level. The position taken here is that an important factor in influencing the quality of higher education is the attention given to the improvement of teaching. Because the ability to create and manage learning environments for students depends on accurate appraisals of those activities in implementation, implicit in any notion of good teaching is an obligation on the part of the teacher to evaluate teaching and learning. It follows that encouragement of informed reflection on the quality of teaching is an important dimension of the professional development responsibilities of distance teaching institutions. Over the last two years, three Australian Universities have been cooperating on a Commonwealth Government funded project 'Distance Teaching and Evaluation Skills' to identify and disseminate good practice in the professional development of distance educators. This paper considers that part of the project that focuses on the improvement of distance teaching through course subject evaluation.

There are two elements in this discussion: first, a position taken on the nature of evaluation when applied to distance teaching, and second, a description of the staff development activities undertaken in the three Universities to encourage such evaluation activity.

Evaluation of distance teaching

Remarkably little has been written about the evaluation of distance teaching, possibly because the concept of teaching at a distance is problematic. There are essentially two schools of thought: that which considers teaching to have an attenuated role in distance education because of the preplanned nature of the process and the determination of teaching events with, at best, students in mind, and alternatively, that which argues that the hallmarks of distance education, its responsiveness and adaptability to students at hand, its concern for

them as individuals, and the individualisation of structured learning processes constitutes an emphasis on teaching as central to distance education practice.

The first school of thought would maintain that evaluation of distance education is essentially about the evaluation of learning and any management processes intended to promote learning and that centre upon the conditions and outcomes of study. The second school would seek to make appraisals about the particular interventions and interactions which define teaching at a distance and are often carried out through the use of various technologies.

Similarly, it has to be recognised that evaluative activity can take many forms. As one of us (Nunan, 1992:1) has written:

> Evaluation is deciding the worth of something. Evaluation activities are characterised by the purposes of the evaluation, the standards that are applied in making judgements and whose interests might be served by using such criteria, and the degree to which the information collected and the judgements made are available to various stakeholders. There are related technical issues of where, when and how data is obtained and who collects it. Hence evaluation activity can be carried out at different levels and for different purposes.

This complexity of evaluative activity coupled with the problematic nature of teaching at a distance is compounded by the taken-for-granted standards which usually define good teaching. In higher education, which is our area of interest, most of the literature on evaluation of teaching focuses upon face to face teaching. This focus has led to the identification of factors which students use to describe good practice and often there is the assumption that such factors can also be applied to teaching at a distance. While it is our position that there are no special characteristics that logically lead to conceptions of teaching or learning which differ from those we would use generally, nevertheless we believe that

assumptions about good teaching derived from face to face teaching may not transfer completely to teaching at a distance and there is a need to be sensitive to differences in practices which require special considerations.

Moses (1984:29) summarises factors commonly used to describe superior university teaching in the following equation:

Effective teaching = competence in subject matter
+ communication skills
+ commitment to facilitating student learning
+ concern for individual students

These factors are useful in understanding face-to-face teaching and have parallels in distance education, although configured differently there. Anecdotal evidence suggests that those who evaluate distance teaching and learning at university level commonly focus upon:

1. evaluating the learning packages supplied to students,
2. evaluating the support mechanisms employed by the institution and tutor to facilitate learning, and
3. evaluating the teaching and assessment arrangements experienced by students through their assignment load.

Our interpretation would be that learning packages reveal lecturer competence in subject matter, the application of communication skills to support learning, and commitment to flexibility in addressing different learning needs. The support mechanisms adopted by both institutions and tutor reveal the extent to which special needs arising from the learning milieux of individual students are acknowledged. The focus on assignment expectations is fundamental in that this is the irreducible minimum experience that occurs as a formal requirement of participation in the study program and in responding to assignments teachers may reveal competencies in any or all of the factors that Moses describes.

Staff development activities in evaluation of distance teaching and learning

In the 'Distance Teaching and Evaluation' Project, we focussed on how best to foster the evaluation of teaching and learning at a distance which, as indicated in the first paragraph of this paper, was seen to be the responsibility of the teaching academic. The strategy we adopted was to develop a specific and supportive professional development intervention which was trialed at the University of South Australia. This involved an iterative process directed towards the clarification of the characteristics used to define good distance teaching and learning on which student feedback might be sought. The context for this was a particular evaluation strategy already familiar to the academics involved and from which specific and detailed responses from participants were obtained, assessed and acted upon.

Our perceptions of this intervention were tested at Monash and Deakin Universities, where academics who taught at a distance were guided a through a process that encouraged their critical reflection on the improvement of distance teaching. Our intention was to avoid a concentrated focus on a specific evaluation strategy by making the question of what and how to evaluate distance teaching and learning problematic. What was sought were more general responses to issues arising from the improvement of teaching and learning at a distance and where responses moved to specific characteristics of teaching and learning we were able to compare these with those discussed at the University of South Australia. Both approaches are elaborated below.

The intervention developed at the Distance Education Centre of the University of South Australia was based on the following assumptions:

1. good distance teaching involves a range of evaluative activities which should be initiated and controlled by teachers,

2. support mechanisms for fostering evaluative activity should not diminish teacher responsibilities for the design of evaluative strategies and instruments and different approaches should be supported,
3. any support mechanisms developed should undergo periodic review involving those who use them, and
4. there should be encouragement provided to move beyond the techniques or processes for which support arrangements exist.

The details of the intervention were as follows.

A group of experienced distance teaching academics was asked to comment on the suitability of components of an evaluation questionnaire that sought student responses to any distance teaching package with which they might currently be working. The questionnaire had been developed by a senior academic working with the Distance Education Centre, modified in trials, and subsequently used by dozens of lecturers to review their teaching over three years. The questionnaire was in the form of a glossary on the University's materials production system which could be incorporated at an academic's discretion into a teaching package, either in its base form, or with changed stimulus questions determined by the lecturer concerned. In essence, the academic could change the text of standard questions, omit questions, or replace them with others but retain the overall format of the questionnaire. The reference group was specifically charged to consider whether the areas about which information was sought were appropriate and how individual questions within them might be refined to yield more helpful information.

The group had been provided with copies of the questionnaire in advance and met together to discuss their responses to it. Their concerns were principally about four matters:

1. the generality of the questionnaire and their need for specific information about particular aspects of their teaching,

2. the common and repetitive use of the questionnaire and the impact of this on students,
3. the need for simplicity and ease in varying the questionnaire to their own purposes, and
4. the specific areas around which information might reasonably be sought.

In reaction to this, staff of the Distance Education Centre produced five evaluation templates which incorporated a revised general and four shorter instruments, each of which dealt with one aspect covered in the larger questionnaire. Sections covered in that document were (1) subject content, (2) the study package and library services, (3) the teaching process, and (4) assessment. There were optional questions in each section and opportunity for students to make general comments. A final section dealt with services provided by the Distance Education Centre and was not intended for use by the academic staff member.

The separate instruments were individually smaller but allowed for more specific feedback on the different topics covered, which were presented as (1) subject matter, (2) teaching arrangements and interactions, (3) resources for learning, and (4) assignments and assessment.

The five templates were produced in a document Constructing an evaluation questionnaire (Distance Education Centre, 1992) which invited academics to consider (1) what matters they desired feedback from students upon, (2) whether they sought general feedback or wanted more detailed information, and (3) whether they wished to use the templates in their present fashion or amend them to pursue matters relevant to their own program. A final option allowed for a staff member to develop a quite different set of questions and advise the Distance Education Centre on a preferred format so a unique instrument could be prepared.

This document was circulated to the original group of participating academics, whose comments led to some revision and then its distribution within the University. The approach

described above was devised by Ted Nunan and achieved strong support as a potentially most helpful initiative from the academic reference group. It reflected the assumptions listed earlier but was also a deliberate professional development intervention by those with academic leadership responsibilities in the Distance Education Centre. In particular, it allowed individual academics to test student responses to aspects of their teaching that had been established by the reference group as general concerns but with the capacity to vary questions about those areas to suit their own subject and teaching approaches.

The professional development activities undertaken at Deakin and Monash Universities were deliberately different in nature and intention. As indicated above, the matter of the improvement of distance teaching and learning was made problematic. Discussion occurred without reference to some particular approach to evaluation and because participants brought very different experience and expertise to the workshops both the processes employed by the organisers and the responses obtained at the two universities varied.

Two sessions were conducted at each University by Ted Nunan, Helen Lentell and Jane Keedle with purposes agreed by the three as:

1. encouraging participants to undertake critical analysis of practice to reveal issues about evaluation,
2. encouraging participants to address evaluation as something they would do and own as an integral part of improving their teaching at a distance,
3. encouraging participants to identify areas on which information from students would be helpful in taking action to improve their teaching practice and clarifying the kinds of questions which might most readily elicit such information, and
4. providing activities suitable for staff development by heads of schools or faculties or be useful as a source of information for staff engaged in improving their evaluation activities.

At both universities the sessions encouraged academics to analyse critically an example of the practice of one of their group and consider ways in which this and other features of distance education might be usefully evaluated by themselves as teachers.

Among the responses were:

1. a marked hesitancy to 'own' evaluation issues which might influence or change personal distance teaching practice, shaped by a view of evaluation as a specialist, difficult, and time-consuming activity and a lack of conceptual clarity about the nature of distance teaching, and
2. a concern with evaluation issues in general, rather than in relation to distance teaching and learning, including the impact of institutional support and culture upon evaluation, the need to consider a range of stakeholders, issues surrounding the collection and use of information, and criteria for interpretation of information.

These issues are important and reflect the complexity of evaluative activity. It was the task of the team to assist the group in grounding and limiting these concerns by relating them to the evaluation of factors which influenced the quality of distance teaching and learning.

The groups identified such areas as the following: quality of feedback to students, improving assessment as a factor in enhancing distance teaching, and the role of student expectations in framing their approach to learning. When encouraged to move to specific matters on which they might seek data as part of their evaluative activity in relation to these areas, the academics involved suggested topics closely related to those identified in South Australia and included in the templates. The document, Constructing an evaluation questionnaire, was distributed to participants who indicated that it addressed the concerns they had identified and could be used in gathering information useful in improving their own distance teaching practice

The discussions generated much more than this, of course. For example, in relation to the evaluation of teaching and learning, groups saw a need for the following: staff awareness of the options available, the existence of support for evaluation activities, agreement on the criteria for successful learning and the importance of taking account of long-term effects of teaching and learning, the ability to interpret any data and its meaning in terms of what to change in teaching or courses, the capacity to evaluate processes as well as products, together with a range of practical concerns, eg. achieving adequate response rates.

The consequence of the Deakin and Monash University workshops was that the project group considered the approach undertaken at the University of South Australia had legitimacy as a supportive strategy in assisting academics who sought to use evaluation techniques in an endeavour to improve their distance teaching. The document, Constructing an evaluation questionnaire, was considered appropriate for inclusion in the general professional development resources to be made available under the auspices of the Distance Teaching and Evaluation Skills project.

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